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Friends of the Cibola National Forest

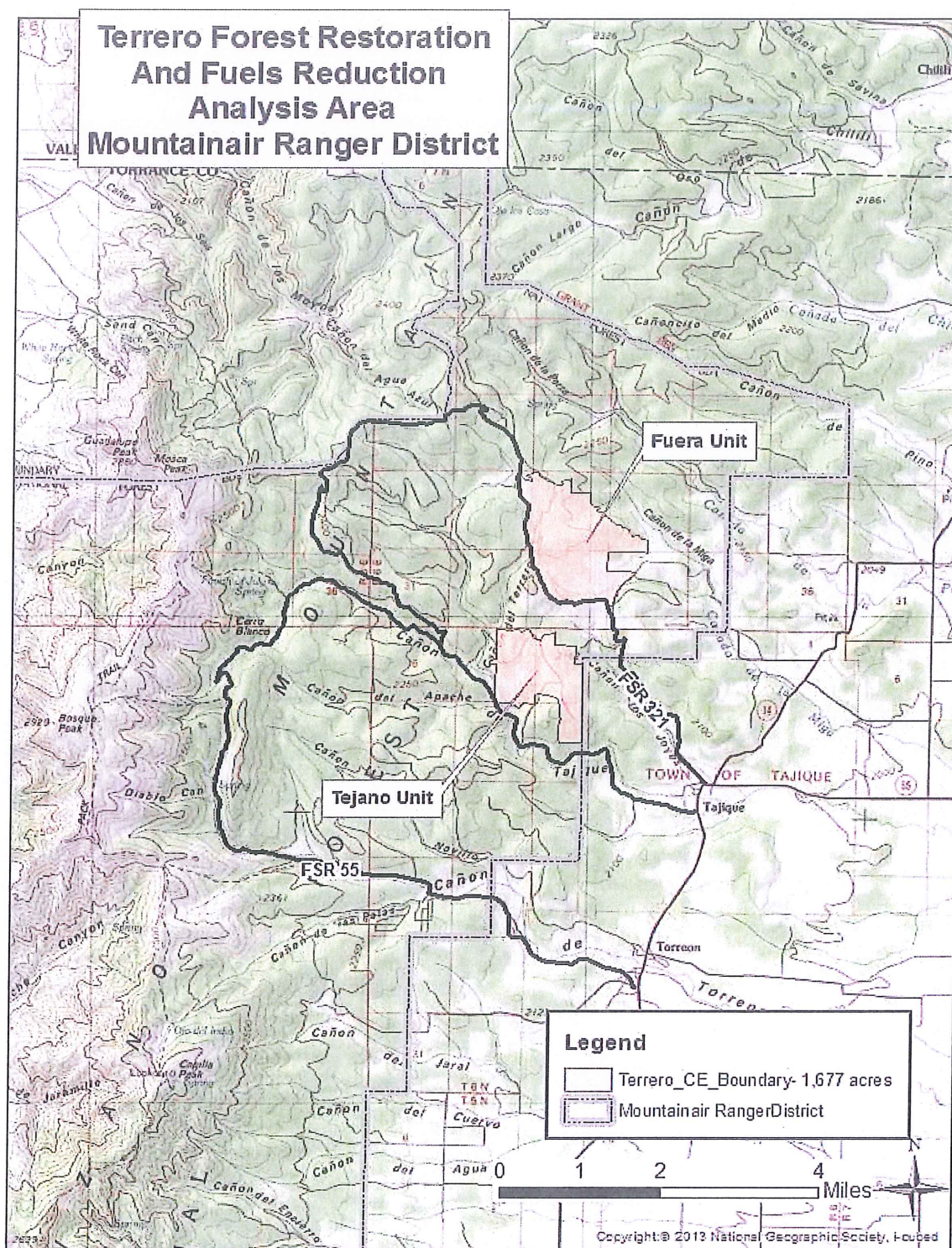
The Mountainair Ranger District of the Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands is requesting your comments on the proposed **Terrero Fuels Reduction and Forest Restoration Project**. The proposed analysis area encompasses approximately 1,677 acres in the Manzano Mountains and is located on east-facing slopes, west of Tajique and Torreon. The project area is divided into two separate treatment areas (Fuera and Tejano). The Fuera Unit is 1,014 acres in size and is located immediately north and east of FR 321. Cañon del Terrero and Cañon del Trocon Negro are situated to the west of the unit and Cañon de la Miga is located to the east. The Tejano unit is 662 acres in size. It is located immediately adjacent the eastern forest boundary, with FR 55 situated at the southern end of the unit. The legal description for the project is T. 7N, R.6E, Section 4, 5, 9, 28, 33 New Mexico Principal Meridian (*see Map 1 Analysis Area*).

BACKGROUND

The project area is located in the northeastern portion of the Manzano Mountains, west of the communities of Tajique and Torreon. The Manzano Mountains and their associated natural resources have been integral in the establishment and continued inhabitation of several local tribes and land grants that reside along the length of the range. The rich history, geology, and access to essential resources, have made the mountains of great cultural importance to these communities.

In the past several years, the vegetation of the Manzano Mountains has been impacted by increased drought, insect and disease related mortality, lack of direct forest management, and the long-term effects of aggressively suppressing all wildfires. These factors have created an unnatural buildup of live and dead fuels, resulting in unhealthy forest conditions and increased potential for high intensity crown fires. As a result, the Mountainair Ranger District (MRD) is predominantly categorized as Condition Class 3 (defined as a "significant departure from the natural range of variability and predisposed to a high risk of loss of key ecosystem components", Hann and Brunnell 2001).





Map 1: Analysis and Treatment Area

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the Terrero Forest Restoration and Fuels Reduction Project is to improve the ecosystem resilience of a priority landscape to future disturbances by restoring forest structure and composition and reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Resilience is the “ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbance while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organization, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change” (Forest Service Manual 2020.5). A critical component of improving resilience in the Project Area is creating conditions that facilitate the reintroduction of fire, a keystone ecological process, in the frequent-fire vegetation types found across this landscape. This translates to managing forest structure, composition and densities that would not contribute to active crown fire. Moreover, prescribed burns and natural ignitions under most circumstances would remain at low to moderate intensities.

To increase the resilience of the forests and watersheds of Terrero Project Area, there is a need to:

1. Move frequent-fire forests in the Project Area towards their characteristic species composition, structure and spatial patterns in order to improve ecological function.
2. Create conditions that facilitate the safe reintroduction of fire, allowing fire to play its natural role in frequent fire forest types.
3. Reduce the risk for large high-intensity wildfires, create safe, defensible zones for firefighters and minimize the risk of fire to nearby valued resources.
4. Improve and maintain diverse wildlife habitats to provide a large array of habitat types, habitat components, seral stages and corridors for a variety of species that utilize the area; and
5. Improve watershed conditions by restoring the vegetative structure and composition of riparian ecosystems and by maintaining and improving water quality.

Another important need to implement vegetation treatments is to provide the much-needed resource of forest products, i.e. fuelwood, latillas (posts) and vigas (poles). The surrounding communities rely heavily on these products for both personal and economic reasons.

The project area, when treated will provide continuity in fuels reduction and forest restoration treatments along the front range of the Manzano Mountains. These treatments have occurred on private property, state and local municipalities and forest service lands.

Proposed Action

A variety of vegetation treatments will be used to restore and improve forest health, improve wildlife habitat, and protect neighboring communities and private property from uncharacteristic wildfires originating from National Forest Service lands. Treatments may include hand-thinning of vegetation, mastication (use of heavy equipment to turn trees into mulch), removal of forest products, and prescribed fire.

The existing condition for both ponderosa pine and dry mixed conifer is deficient of trees greater than 16” DBH. This project proposes to not cut any trees over this diameter to assist in moving

the area to desired condition unless identified as hazard trees within 250' of roads and Forest Service and private property boundary lines.

To move these stands toward the desired condition as described previously; an uneven-aged (where trees are found in three or more distinct age classes, either intimately mixed or in small groups) silvicultural system along with prescribe fire would be used. All treatment areas may be entered multiple times and different timeframes to meet the desired conditions described above. Prescribed fire would be the primary maintenance tool used to reduce tree densities and undesirable tree regeneration and promote grasses and forbs. TPA as described below will include all species 5" DBH or DRC or greater.

Proposed Actions within the Project Area:

- On slopes less than 40%, trees will be thinned by any of the following methods;
 - *Cut/Skid/Decked:*
 - trees 5" and greater will be decked and sold as fuelwood
 - Material less than 5" will be treated as slash on site or masticated
 - *Mastication:* masticated material will not exceed 4" in depth
 - *Hand-Thinning:* areas with access by 4x4 vehicles may either be thinned by contract and/or commercial fuelwood permit holders. The material generated will be collected through fuelwood permits.
- Areas identified to have little or no value for fuelwood will be treated through mastication and/or with prescribed fire.
- Identified hazard trees within 250' of roads and private property boundaries will be hand felled, mechanically felled and/or masticated.
- Prescribed burning will be implemented throughout the entire project area. Treatments may include, broadcast burning, pile burning, jackpot burning, hand ignition and/or aerial ignitions. Prescribed burns will be conducted within a pre-determined area and within pre-determined burning parameters designed to meet the objectives of the project. Maintenance burns will be recommended on a 4-18-year interval to eliminate the rapid re-establishment of ponderosa pine, juniper, oak, and other shrub species, as well as allowing grasses and forbs to become established.
- During project implementation roads designated as decommissioned could be used to facilitate operations, once operations are complete these roads would be decommissioned. Level 1 roads would be used during operations and these roads would then be closed post operations.

Slash Disposal: Activity fuel such as bole wood, slash, hand piles, and mastication grindings would be treated as needed to meet fuels reduction and scenic quality objectives through prescribed burning when conditions allow for safe and effective burning. All prescribed burning would comply with Lincoln County air quality regulations and will be approved through appropriate permitting processes.

Connected Actions: All National Forest System (NFS) roads in the project area would have the required maintenance accomplished at various times during implementation to mitigate resource

damage and provide for safe use. In addition to NFS roads, there are numerous miles of unauthorized (“non-system”) roads within the project area that would be used to facilitate access for treatments, wood removal and as prescribed burn control lines. After project completion, the disposition/decommissioning of the roads will be in accordance with the Mountainair Ranger District Travel Management Rule Decision. Cross country travel corridors would be rehabilitated by ripping compacted soils, installing erosion control features, seeding the impacted areas with native grasses and using slash to cover impacted corridors to 80% coverage, hand piling slash where needed to provide for manageable prescribed fire conditions, and lopping and scattering slash not collected through fuelwood gathering to 24” maximum height.

ANALYSIS UNDER THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA)

A Categorical Exclusion (CE) is currently being conducted for this proposal. I expect that documentation of this decision will be through preparation of a case file and Decision Memo.

How to Comment

To be most effective in our analysis we need your comments by Friday, October 8, 2021.

- Written comments must be submitted to: Aaron Johnson, Terrero Forest Restoration and Fuels Reduction NEPA Project Lead, 11776 HWY 337, Tijeras, NM 87059. Fax phone number is 505-281-1176.
- Hand-delivered or oral comments must be submitted weekdays, excluding holidays, 8:00 am - 4:30 pm to the Mountainair Ranger District Office, 40 Ranger Station Rd, Mountainair, NM 87036, or called in to-Phone: 505-847-2990.
- Comments may be submitted by email in word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), text (.txt), and hypertext markup language (.html) to aaron.j.johnson@usda.gov

Comments received, including names and addresses, will be considered part of the public record for this project, and will be available for public inspection.

Written comments on the proposal, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this Proposed Action and will be available for public inspection. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR§1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency’s decision regarding the request for confidentiality; and where the request is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within seven (7) days.

A detailed project summary and proposed action for this project can be found at http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/project_list.php?forest=110303&sortby=area [link to project list](#)

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "E. Taylor", written over the printed name.

ERNEST TAYLOR
District Ranger